

Anniversaries tend to have a ritualistic and stereotypical character, features which, I can assure, are entirely absent from the works that follow. As Editor, I can only wish that readers will take as much pleasure in this collection, as I did in preparing it in admiration of one of my favourite authors.

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## **Equivocal Praise and National-Imperial Conundrums: Gogol's "A Few Words About Pushkin"**

**ABSTRACT:** Gogol's "A Few Words about Pushkin" has traditionally been viewed as evidence that Gogol idolized Pushkin as a national poet *par excellence*. This article argues that behind Gogol's deference for Russia's greatest poet lie layers of polemic and subversive iconoclasm. Though he initially proclaims Pushkin Russia's national poet, Gogol goes on to use his trademark rhetorical tools to effectively strip the poet of the honour. In doing so, he attempts to influence the reception of his own writings, which at the time predominantly concerned Ukrainian themes, in ways that would encourage his Russian audience to consider him—and not Pushkin—as Russia's premier national writer. Countering Pushkin's Russocentric model of national culture, Gogol champions instead a centrifugal conception of national-imperial identity that places Russia's imperial periphery at the center of the "Russian" experience.

PUSHKIN: What the devil! Seems I've tripped over Gogol!

GOGOL: (*Getting up*) What a vile abomination! You can't even have a rest. (*Walks off, stumbles over PUSHKIN and falls*) Seems I've stumbled over Pushkin!

PUSHKIN: (*Getting up*) Not a minute of peace! (*Walks off, stumbles over GOGOL and falls*) What the devil! Seems I've tripped over Gogol again!

GOGOL: (*Getting up*) Always an obstacle in everything! (*Walks off, stumbles over PUSHKIN and falls*) It's a vile abomination! Tripped over Pushkin again!

PUSHKIN: (*Getting up*) Hooliganism! Sheer hooliganism! (*Walks off, stumbles over GOGOL and falls*) [etc., etc.]

Daniil Kharms, "Pushkin and Gogol" (1934)

### INTRODUCTION

A tradition of contrasting the Pushkinian and Gogolian origins of modern Russian literature began famously with N. G. Chernyshevskii and was later reinvented by V. Rozanov.<sup>1</sup> Yet Russian literary criticism has also produced an

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opposite critical trend, which has stressed the personal and artistic relationship between the two writers and noted Gogol's apparent indebtedness to Pushkin in almost every aspect of his art. Gukovskii's famous monograph on Gogol typifies this trend. It makes Pushkin an absolute reference point without which Gogol would have been unthinkable, and situates a commentary on Pushkin as the *sine qua non* of any meaningful commentary on Gogol.<sup>2</sup> Russian literary criticism, both imperial and Soviet, eager to construct teleologies in the manner of royal lines of succession, placed Pushkin at the head of Russian literature and crowned Gogol as his successor. Pushkin's purported gift to Gogol of the plots of his two greatest works, *The Government Inspector* and *Dead Souls*, achieved a significance approaching the transfer of regalia. Gogol's 1835 *Arabesques* article "Neskol'ko slov o Pushkine" [A Few Words about Pushkin], in which he eulogizes Pushkin as a national poet, has served as important evidence that Gogol treated Pushkin as his mentor and placed him on a pedestal.

What I propose here is a close reading of this article that finds Gogol's praise of Pushkin double-edged and disingenuous. The text contradicts the idea of the two writers as amicable collaborators in the arts, at least as far as Gogol—despite his mercenary posturing—was concerned. The text bears the stamp of characteristic Gogolian chutzpah that most students of Gogol—myself included—find quite amusing and readily forgivable. But along with the fun of cheeky innuendo the article also carries a serious message with regard to Gogol's conception of "national" art. In the course of discussing Pushkin's strategies of encoding nationality in literature, Gogol develops his own conception of national literary expression, by which he aims to affix the stamp of nationality to his own writings, rather than Pushkin's.

The complexities of Gogolian texts often echo the complexities of his biography and "A Few Words About Pushkin" proves a case in point. The

<sup>1</sup> Nikolai G. Chernyshevskii, "Ocherki gogolievskogo perioda russkoi literatury" [1855–1856], in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v piatnadsati tomakh*, vol. 3 (Moscow: OGIz, 1947) 5–43. Vasilii Rozanov, "Pushkin i Gogol," in *Legenda o velikom Inkvizitore F. M. Dostoevskogo, s prilozheniem dvukh etiidov o Gogole*, 3rd ed. [1906] (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1970) 253–265. Rozanov was likely influenced by Konstantin Leontiev's *Analiz, stil' i veianie: O romanakh gr. L. N. Tolstogo* (journal publication 1890, book version 1911).

<sup>2</sup> Gukovskii first mentions Gogol's name on page 3 and begins to discuss Gogol only around page 16; the preceding matter is entirely focused on Pushkin (Grigorii A. Gukovskii, *Realizm Gogolia* [Moscow, Leningrad: Khudozh. literatura, 1959]). See also Georgii P. Makogonenko, *Gogol' i Pushkin* (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1985) and Vasilii V. Gippius, *Gogol*, edited and translated by Robert Maguire (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1989) 40–45. Western Slavists have also stressed the enormous significance of the Pushkinian precedence for Gogol, among them Donald Fanger (*The Creation of Nikolai Gogol* [Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1979]), and Robert Maguire (*Exploring Gogol* [Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1994]).

nature and extent of the two writers' friendship is a matter of some controversy. Though most students of Russian literature inherit an image of the two writers as warm and respectful friends, some critics, like Vladimir Nabokov, Dmitry Mirsky, and Andrei Siniavskii, have doubted Gogol's and Pushkin's personal closeness. Most recently, Yuri Druzhnikov has gathered known factual data and debunked this entrenched myth.<sup>3</sup> Druzhnikov is right to note Pushkin's reserved, business-like tone in his scanty correspondence with Gogol and his attempts to keep the young Ukrainian at arm's length. Gogol himself, who shamelessly dropped Pushkin's name to impress his friends, wildly exaggerated and mischaracterized the scope of their personal contacts, particularly during the summer of 1831.<sup>4</sup> Gogol's own claim of intimacy with Pushkin appears questionable also in light of his correspondence after Pushkin's death, in which Gogol's lamentations ring hollow.<sup>5</sup>

Gogol's attitude to Pushkin was in fact quite self-serving. He cultivated the preeminent poet to gain publicity and patronage, asking Pushkin to intercede on his behalf with the authorities, and to improve his own standing in salon circles. Gogol most likely himself fabricated the story of Pushkin's gift of the plots of *Revizor* [The Government Inspector] and *Mertvye dushi* [Dead Souls]. Transforming Pushkin into the source of Gogol's most important creative ideas allowed Gogol to envelop his much-criticized works in the esteemed poet's mantle, a strategy meant to shield them from attacks. As Druzhnikov points out, Gogol started mentioning the idea only after Pushkin's death, when no

<sup>3</sup> Yuri Druzhnikov, *Contemporary Russian Myths: A Skeptical View of the Literary Past* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1999) 31–52. See pp. 31–33 for Druzhnikov's discussion of other critics who were skeptical of the two writers' closeness.

<sup>4</sup> Writing to Aleksandr S. Danilevskii on 2 November 1831, Gogol offhandedly mentions that he spent the summer in Tsarskoe Selo and Pavlovsk, enjoying himself almost each evening in the company of Pushkin and Zhukovskii (Nikolai V. Gogol, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 10 [Moscow: Izd. Akad. nauk SSSR, 1937–1952] 214; all further references to Gogol's texts are taken from this edition; all translations from Russian are mine). The truth is that Gogol never stayed in Tsarskoe Selo, but in Pavlovsk, where an hour's walk through the woods separated him from the two poets (he could not afford a cab). He saw Pushkin and Zhukovskii not each evening, but at most a few times (see Druzhnikov 39–41).

<sup>5</sup> Though he dutifully eulogizes the poet in his letters, the loss seems insufficiently tragic for Gogol to temper his joy at being in Rome. Around the time he lamented the poet's death to Pletnev, he sent letters to his mother and to Prokopovich that exude a feeling of contentment (Gogol 11: 89–90, 93–94). Writing to Pletnev, Gogol claims to be crushed by Pushkin's death, yet following the dirge, he quite unceremoniously proceeds to discuss his financial arrangements (Gogol 11: 8–9). Robert Maguire, though he believes Pushkin represented for Gogol an ideal artist, also questions the sincerity of Gogol's grief in these letters (Maguire 111–112).

refutations on Pushkin's part were possible.<sup>6</sup> Entirely justified in imputing to Gogol' more far-reaching objectives of self-aggrandizement, Siniavskii observes: "Gogol himself placed [Pushkin's] hand in benediction on himself... he needed to be on good terms with Pushkin, so that from him, from the greatest poet in Russia, he could start his own reckoning, his own genealogy—of prose."<sup>7</sup>

But while the myth of Pushkin's enthusiasm for young Gogol' and the closeness of their "friendship" have finally been challenged, Gogol's idolatry of Pushkin remains largely unquestioned. A careful reading of Gogol's "A Few Words about Pushkin" offers good reasons to take a hard look at this myth as well. While the larger question of Gogol's and Pushkin's artistic relationship remains beyond the purview of this article, I hope to advance the debate on this question by analyzing in depth an important piece of evidence that relates to it. The detailed close reading of Gogol's article that I propose here points to a need to go beyond the notion of Gogol's unqualified and unchanging enthusiasm for Pushkin, toward a more nuanced vision of his approach to the poet. Such a vision would make room for Gogol's adversarial, competitive impulses, for his growing sense of artistic differences with Pushkin, and for his increasing discrimination about what exactly he did or did not consider to be Pushkin's strengths. Although Gogol' indisputably viewed Pushkin as a great Russian poet—a sense of which comes through already in Gogol's youthful encomium to Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*<sup>8</sup>—he came to regard him less accomplished as a speaker for the nation. At the time Gogol' wrote "A Few Words About Pushkin," this happened to be a big disadvantage, both in Gogol's view and in that of his contemporaries.

#### NATIONAL UNIQUENESS: THE "ALPHA AND OMEGA" OF THE TIME

Though readers today admire Pushkin's and Gogol's art without fretting about its success in conveying Russian national specificity, this elusive goal was a central preoccupation of Russian culture in the decades of the 1820s and 1830s, indeed well into the second half of the nineteenth century. So inseparable was it from the culture of the period that nationalism and Romanticism, it has been argued, prove inseparable in the case of Russia.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the manifesto of Russian Romanticism, Orest Somov's "On Romantic Poetry" (1823), emphatically puts the equal sign between Romanticism and national uniqueness. The journalistic literature in these decades overflows with polemics about Russian *narodnost'*, as every journal and every critic felt the need to take a

<sup>6</sup> Druzhnikov 43. Leon Stilman also took a skeptical view of this matter (*Gogol*, edited by Galina Stilman [Tenafly, N. J.: Hermitage Publishers, 1990] 179–185).

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Druzhnikov 37.

<sup>8</sup> Gogol' 8: 148–152.

<sup>9</sup> Lauren Leighton, "Russian Romantic Criticism: An Introduction," in *Russian Romantic Criticism: An Anthology* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987) ix.

position on this issue. In the 1820s, the polemicists included Viazemskii, Bestuzhev-Marlinskii, Kireevskii, Bulgarin, Venevitinov, Kiukhelbeker, and the Polevoi brothers. How to define the very concept of *narodnost'*? Does Russia indeed possess national specificity? If so, what does it consist in? If not, can Russia ever develop it? Nationalism being always a distinctly international phenomenon, this preoccupation engulfed Russia as part of a European-wide ferment—ironically, as part of its Westernization, as Hans Rogger has influentially argued.<sup>10</sup> Convinced by the German and the French that nationality constituted the true measure of a culture's worth, the Russians were at pains to find it or construct it. Authors who were seen as fulfilling this cultural imperative ranked higher than those who were not. In addition to programmatic articles on this topic, practically every annual survey of Russian literature—the staple of journalistic culture of the period—gauged the year's worth of domestic literary product in relation to its yield of *narodnost'*. The late 1820s and 1830s also saw a Herder-inspired fascination with folk songs, which were treated as a repository of an ancient national spirit. A Romantic, Herderian *Volk*-based conception of national specificity spread like wildfire, often losing attribution in the process.

Pushkin himself, inspired by the above debates, complained in an unpublished sketch of 1825, which Gogol' would not have known, that everyone demands national quality in literature but no one cares to define it. Yet Pushkin's own attempt at a definition also proved futile:

Nationality in a writer is a merit that can be fully appreciated only by his compatriots—others may think it does not exist or consider it a fault.... Climate, a form of government, and faith give each nation a unique physiognomy, which is more or less reflected in the mirror of poetry. There are ways of thinking and feeling, there is a mist of mores, beliefs, and customs that belong exclusively to a given nation.<sup>11</sup>

Pushkin thus begins to define a *nation* in terms reminiscent of Herder, yet ultimately also falls short of defining what makes *literature* national. Compatriots know it when they see it—this seems to be the closest that Pushkin comes to a definition (which may be why the sketch remained unfinished).

Vissarion Belinskii's own entry into journalism with "Literaturnye mechtaniia" [Literary Reveries] in 1834 also centred on the question of Russian *narodnost'*—its current lack and future promise. With his unerring sense of the country's cultural pulse, he proclaimed national specificity in this article as the "Alpha and Omega" of the new period of Russian literature, which he labels as

<sup>10</sup> Hans Rogger, *National Consciousness in Eighteenth-Century Russia* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1960) 276–281.

<sup>11</sup> Aleksandr S. Pushkin, "O narodnosti v literature," in *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, vol.5. (St. Petersburg: Bibliopolis, 1993–1994) 144–145.

post-Pushkinian.<sup>12</sup> Pushkin, according to Belinskii, could not serve as a model for this new, national Russian literature. A year later he crowned Gogol' as its leader in "On the Russian Tale and the Tales of Mr. Gogol'," which was occasioned by the publication of *Arabesques* and *Mirgorod* (in 1835). Praising Gogol's nationally-inflected fictions in "On the Russian Tale," Belinskii goes so far as to claim that "*narodnost'* is not a special merit, but a necessary condition of a truly artistic work."<sup>13</sup> As evident even in the first of Belinskii's articles, the idea that Pushkin was passé in the new, nationalizing era of Russian culture was certainly not unique to Gogol'. One also wonders if Belinskii's "Literary Reveries" may have encouraged Gogol' to venture comparisons between his own nationalism and Pushkin's—and to think himself more accomplished in this regard.<sup>14</sup>

The cause of *narodnost'* gained state sponsorship in the very year in which Gogol' wrote his article on Pushkin, 1834, when Nicholas I created the Ministry of National Education and placed Sergei Uvarov at its head. The concept became part of official state ideology, called Official Nationality, and its tripartite slogan: Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality. Gogol's friend, Petr Pletnev, outlined the state version of literary nationality, with its emphasis on fostering civic spirit, in the opening issue of the ministry's journal.<sup>15</sup>

Gogol' actively participated in this nationalizing ferment and came to consider an expression of nationality art's key social function. His first volume of stories, *Vechera na khutore bliz Dikan'ki* [Evenings on a Farm near Dikan'ka], (1831–1832) richly capitalized on the Russian fashion for *narodnost'*. The work captured Russian audiences with its uncannily original and vivid rendition of the Ukrainian national spirit, on which every single review commented. Gogol' surely took note of it and later, in the process of refashioning himself from a Ukrainian into a Russian national writer, announced to his friends and supporters his major novel *Dead Souls* as a national panorama of Russia.<sup>16</sup> In articles he published when applying for a university post in Kyiv in the years 1833–1834, Gogol' basically pledged his allegiance to the government ideology of Official Nationality. Indeed, Gogol' was *the* most frequent contributor to

<sup>12</sup> Vissarion G. Belinskii, "Literaturnye mechtaniia," in *Sobranie sochinenii v devyati tomakh*, vol.1 (Moscow: Khudozh. literatura, 1976–1981) 114.

<sup>13</sup> Belinskii 172.

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Moeller-Sally discusses "A Few Words About Pushkin" in the context of the changing institutional landscape of Russian literature and of Belinskii's comments on Pushkin's "creative demise" and Gogol's ascendancy in his *Gogol's Afterlife: The Evolution of a Classic in Imperial and Soviet Russia* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern Univ. Press, 2002) 23–28.

<sup>15</sup> Petr Pletnev, "O narodnosti v literature," *Zhurnal Ministerstva narodnogo prosveshcheniia* 1 (1834).

<sup>16</sup> Gogol' 10: 375; 11: 77 and 332–333.

Uvarov's *Journal of the Ministry of National Education* in its first year, contributing as many as four articles that later made their way to *Arabesques*. His later works on Russia dwell on national themes and their reception occasioned major debates in Russian culture on the topic of Russian national identity, a vivid example of which was the clash between the Westernizer Belinskii and the Slavophiles Shevyrev and Konstantin Aksakov, on the topic of *Dead Souls*.<sup>17</sup> Writing to his confessor Konstantinovskii soon before his death about what he calls "the conception of my writing," Gogol' himself discusses his life's work as a project of discovering Russian national identity.<sup>18</sup> This task was to Gogol' the key social function of art, through which he hoped to fulfill his service to the fatherland, as he later put it in his "An Author's Confession."<sup>19</sup>

As this brief overview demonstrates, the question of the national dimension in art was a key concern both in the culture of the period and in Gogol's conceptual framework. To debate the nationalism of Russia's most accomplished poet meant to relate his work to the country's vital cultural task. It was far from an idle intellectual exercise; indeed, it was a charged, highly topical issue that pertained quite directly to the standing of Russian culture in the European hierarchy, and to the troubled question of Russia's national identity. The aesthetic and philosophical debates of the 1820s–1840s marked *narodnost'* as the highest artistic distinction. For Gogol', who in his own literary work and historical research was quite consumed with the question of Russia's—and Ukraine's—national uniqueness, and who aspired to the status of the empire's national bard, the topic of Pushkin's nationalism was of intense personal significance. How to reconcile Russia's imperial condition with its nationalist imperatives? This problem animates Gogol's commentary on Pushkin's poetry as well as his own literary practice.

In 1835, when "A Few Words About Pushkin" appeared, the appreciation of Pushkin's wonderful universality that Dostoevskii made so famous in his 1880 speech was absent from the cultural horizon.<sup>20</sup> The categories of "greatness" in the 1830s were too bound up with the question of *narodnost'*. When Gogol' himself alludes to Pushkin's universality in *Selected Passages* (more on this below), he means it as an accusation of insufficient nationality. Dostoevskii later

<sup>17</sup> See the following reviews of *Dead Souls*: by Vissarion Belinskii in *Otechestvennye zapiski* 7, 8, 10, 11 (1842); by Stepan Shevyrev in *Moskvitianin* 7 and 8 (1842) and 1 (1843); Konstantin Aksakov, "Neskol'ko slov o poeme Gogolia 'Pokhozheniia Chichikova ili Mertvye dushi,'" in *Estetika i literaturnaia kritika*, edited by V. A. Kosheleva (Moscow: Iskustvo, 1995).

<sup>18</sup> Gogol' 14: 40–41.

<sup>19</sup> Gogol' 8: 441–442.

<sup>20</sup> For an excellent study of Pushkin's posthumous reception in Russian culture, see Stephanie Sandler, *Commemorating Pushkin: Russia's Myth of a National Poet* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004).

took this accusation and ingeniously transformed it into a virtue—a nationalist virtue to boot. For even Dostoevskii treats Pushkin's universality as the poet's key *national* trait: a magnificent openness to other cultures that is somehow characteristically Russian. In the early decades of the century, however, to idolize Pushkin and grant his work centrality in Russian culture required fitting him in a more classic nationalistic framework, a process in which Pushkin initially faced considerable odds.

Indeed, Gogol's designation of Pushkin as Russia's *national* poet was hardly a cliché when it appeared in his 1835 article on the poet. A debate on whether Pushkin merited this calling was then a decade old. When Nikolai Polevoi affixed this label to the poet in his 1825 review of *Eugene Onegin*, he expressed a minority view.<sup>21</sup> Even an anonymous reviewer for Polevoi's own journal, *The Moscow Telegraph*, regretted in 1830 that Pushkin's potential to become a national poet remained to be realized.<sup>22</sup>

Most early critics, such as P.A. Viazemskii and D.V. Venevitinov, hailed Pushkin as a great talent but gave him rather low marks for the national quality of his works.<sup>23</sup> F.V. Bulgarin's refusal to distinguish Pushkin as a national poet became conspicuous in the context of the critic's generous bestowal of this honour on Ryleev and Mickiewicz.<sup>24</sup> Following Polevoi's 1825 review, Ivan Kireevskii's 1828 article on Pushkin marks an important step in the process of canonizing Pushkin as a national poet. It plots the trajectory of Pushkin's gradual liberation from foreign models and asserts the formative influence of his immersion in "Russian life." Since Pushkin's self is thoroughly Russian, his poetry's national quality, in Kireevskii's view, represents a byproduct of self-expression rather than any intrinsic feature of the text.<sup>25</sup> In 1835, Gogol—disingenuously, as I argue—continues this canonizing project.

<sup>21</sup> Nikolai A. Polevoi, Rev. of *Eugene Onegin*, by A. S. Pushkin, *Moskovskii telegraf* 2 (1825): 43–51.

<sup>22</sup> *Moskovskii telegraf* 2 (1830): 238–243.

<sup>23</sup> See D. V. Venevitinov's polemic with Polevoi in his *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: Academia, 1934) 220–227, 228–238. In 1825 Viazemskii, having unsuccessfully searched for nationality in Pushkin and Zhukovskii, credited Vasilii Nareznyi, a Ukrainian author writing in Russian, as the first and only example of national expression in Russian letters (Petr A. Viazemskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii Kniazia P. A. Viazemskogo*, vol. 1 [St. Petersburg: Izd. Grafa S. D. Sheremeteva, 1878–1896] 203–204). Viazemskii's complaints about Russia's lack of national literature are often embedded in his commentaries on Pushkin (Viazemskii 1: 78, 103, 169).

<sup>24</sup> Faddei B. Bulgarin, Rev. of *Voinarovskii*, by K. Ryleev, *Severnaia pchela* 14 March 1825: 1.

<sup>25</sup> Ivan Kireevskii, "Nechto o kharaktere poezii Pushkina," in *Kritika i estetika*, edited by Iurii V. Mann (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1979) 53–55 (first published in *Moskovskii vestnik* 8 [1828]: 171–196). Interestingly, around the same time as Kireevskii made Pushkin into a national poet, he often bemoaned Russia's lack of a national culture (Kireevskii 55–79, 79–101).

## EQUIVOCATIONS AND CONUNDRUMS

While "A Few Words About Pushkin" is often cited as evidence that young Gogol venerated Pushkin and championed the public recognition of Pushkin's centrality to Russian culture, the article fails to furnish unambiguous proof of either notion. Behind Gogol's deference to Russia's greatest poet, I find layers of subversive iconoclasm. Behind the ostensible championing of Pushkin's public cause, I find an effort to consign Pushkin to a defunct node of Russian literature. If this is a eulogy, then one with devious twists and a problematic intent.

Far from proposing a disinterested discussion, Gogol subordinates his analysis of the poet to his own artistic and ideological concerns. The article represents an exercise in self-serving journalism, whereby the topic serves as a mere pretense for promoting ideas that Gogol finds useful for his own ends. In this instance, Gogol attempts to set up a reception of his own writings on Ukraine—his *Evenings on a Farm near Dikan'ka* and the historical fiction on Ukraine that, along with the article on Pushkin, appeared in *Arabesques*—in ways that would encourage his Russian audience to consider him, rather than Pushkin, "national." Always meticulously involved in his own image-making, Gogol was among his own most influential biographers and critics.

Having proclaimed Pushkin Russia's preeminent national poet in his opening lines, in the course of his argument Gogol ends up contradicting this statement. He ultimately denies Pushkin's *oeuvre* the distinction of being national while obliquely bolstering his own claim to it. The article insinuates that Gogol is national in ways that Pushkin potentially could have been, but was not. Gogol complicates his initial proposition to such an extent as to render it meaningless. Just as at the end of Gogol's story "The Nose" one is no longer sure what exactly "the nose" means, having surveyed Gogol's arguments in "A Few Words about Pushkin" one no longer knows what a "national poet" means if Pushkin were to exemplify one. In this self-deconstructing eulogy, Gogol's lavish praise masks a criticism of the poet, and his patriotic rhetoric cushions a number of disparaging comments about Russia. Gogol's self-image in the article as a sympathetic fellow aesthete obfuscates his actual competitiveness vis-à-vis Pushkin; his effort to downgrade the poet's achievement and elevate his own. This dynamic recalls Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence" thesis, which holds that young writers instrumentalize and often deliberately misread their powerful literary predecessors in order to launch their own entry into a literary scene.<sup>26</sup>

However, the national-imperial conundrums are no less central to the article than Gogol's equivocal praise of Pushkin. Beyond matters of personal rivalry, the article maps Gogol's ideological polemic with Pushkin regarding the model

<sup>26</sup> Harold Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

of national culture that would best fit Russia's imperial reality. By 1835, Pushkin had articulated his model by publishing works such as "Poltava" (1829), "Klevetnikam Rossii," [To the Slanderers of Russia] (1831), "Borodinskaia godovshchina," [The Anniversary of Borodino] (1831), and the celebratory Prologue to "Mednyi vsadnik," [The Bronze Horseman] (1834). Though these works lack the folk-inflected national colouring so in vogue then, they exude a spirit of civic Russian patriotism and articulate a coherent, assertively Russocentric vision of imperial Russia. They glorify Russia's victory over Mazepa's secessionist Ukraine, remind rebellious Poland's would-be European defenders of the Napoleonic-era bones strewn all around the Russian land, and pay homage to Russia's first official emperor who transformed a Finnish swamp into a flourishing Russian metropolis, thus boldly putting Russia on the course of modern imperial expansion and European prominence. As Katya Hokanson shows in her analysis of the so-called anti-Polish poems of 1831, they display no subtle blending with the Other that was characteristic of Pushkin's earlier southern poems; their tone is politically more strident.<sup>27</sup> "To the Slanderers of Russia" in particular makes imperial status the very condition of Russia's survival, formulating the question that would occupy Russians for the rest of the tsarist period and beyond: "Will Slavic streams unite in a Russian sea?! Will it dry up? That is the question" [*Slavianskie l' ruch'i sol'iutsia v russkom more?! Ono issiaknet? Vot vopros*]. Pushkin insists in this entire constellation of works, including "The Bronze Horseman" and "Poltava," that the empire's non-Russian peripheries should and will remain subordinated to the leadership of what in popular discourse was then called the "ruling nationality" (i.e., ethnic Russians) and its state. Though the poet changed political opinions in his lifetime, his views about the mission of the Russian empire, as Georgii Fedotov argues, have remained remarkably stable.<sup>28</sup>

Gogol' invokes no titles of Pushkin's works in "A Few Words About Pushkin," save for a fleeting reference to *Boris Godunov*. Yet it is strange that he would not single out or openly acknowledge these major patriotic works that show the poet's engagement with key questions of Russian identity. Gogol's thesis, after all, concerns Pushkin's "nationalness." While he does not mention these works, I would argue, however, that Gogol' alludes to them when he

<sup>27</sup> See Katya Hokanson, "In Defense of Empire: 'The Bronze Horseman' and 'To the Slanderers of Russia,'" in *Beyond the Empire: Images of Russia in the Eurasian Cultural Context*, edited by Tetsuo Mochizuki (Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, Hokkaido University, 2008) 149–166. See also Megan Dixon, "Repositioning Pushkin and Poems of the Polish Uprising," in *Polish Encounters, Russian Identity*, edited by David L. Ransel and Božena Shallcross (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press) 49–73.

<sup>28</sup> Georgii P. Fedotov, "Pevets imperii i svobody" [1937], reprint in *Pushkin v russkoi filosofskoi kritike: Konets XIX–XX vek*, edited by R. A. Galtseva (Moscow and St. Petersburg: Universitetskaya kniga, 1999) 379–380.

mentions Pushkin's "most recent poems."<sup>29</sup> If so, it is equally striking that Gogol' dismisses these poems as unpopular and inferior to Pushkin's poems about the Caucasus. To locate Pushkin's nationalist apex in his early poems about an imperial periphery and not in his recent patriotic publications about Russia itself signals Gogol's rejection of Pushkin's vision of Russia, as articulated in these widely known major works.

In place of Pushkin's Russocentric approach, Gogol' proposes a centripetal one: to embrace Russia's imperial periphery and grant it a role in defining "Russianness." Gogol' implies that Russocentric conceptions of the Russian Empire, such as Pushkin's, are flawed and insufficiently attractive to the general reader, presumably also in imperial peripheries, who must be mobilized if Russian culture and Russian (imperial) society are to enter a new and energetic phase of development. Correctly sensing the political sensitivity of such ideas, however, he uses innuendo and understatement to make these points. The article comes at a moment when Gogol' is searching for ways to align his Ukrainian identity with the mission of a Russian writer, and to subsume his cultural and ethnic allegiance to Ukraine within the civic mission of Russian imperial nationalism. He seems to have found Pushkin's models and ideas unhelpful in these projects. Gogol's critical comments in the article about Russian national uniqueness (or lack thereof), are consistent with the writer's far stronger sense of allegiance to Ukrainian, rather than Russian, nationalist concerns in this period, which I have explored at length elsewhere.<sup>30</sup>

#### "A FEW WORDS ABOUT PUSHKIN"

The article's opening lines boldly assert Pushkin's national stature: "Pushkin's name instantly brings to mind a thought about a Russian national poet [*o russkom natsional'nom poete*]. Indeed, none of our poets surpasses him or deserves more to be called national. This right definitely belongs to him."<sup>31</sup> Gogol' then credits Pushkin with realizing the full richness and power of the Russian language. Yet this apparently genuine praise of the poet is followed by a very curious image: "Pushkin is an extraordinary and, possibly, the only revelation of the Russian spirit: this is a Russian in the kind of development in which, possibly, he could appear in Russia in two hundred years. In him, Russian nature, the Russian soul, the Russian character are reflected with the same purity, the same purified beauty, with which a landscape is reflected on the

<sup>29</sup> "poslednie ego poem." Gogol' 8: 52

<sup>30</sup> Edyta Bojanowska, *Nikolai Gogol: Between Ukrainian and Russian Nationalism* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2007). This article draws on a section from the dissertation version of this book (Ph.D. Dissertation [Harvard University, 2002]).

<sup>31</sup> Gogol' 8: 50.



convex surface of a lens."<sup>32</sup> This complex statement, despite its laudatory tone, offers a double-edged assessment of just how national Pushkin—and the Russians—are. It claims that Pushkin represents the *only* revelation of the Russian spirit—which makes this spirit seem rather feeble—and moreover that this kind of Russianness at the moment does not exist anywhere, but *perhaps* will appear in two hundred years. Pushkin's Russianness thus emerges as a future ideal, a literary reverie with no relation to the present state of the Russian nation. Gogol' hints at Pushkin's disjunction from Russia by insisting on the idea of the "purified beauty" that characterizes Pushkin's art, which resembles the reflection of a landscape on a convex lens. Gogol's metaphor conjures up an image of a sanitized, distorted picture, since some objects reflected on the surface of convex glass appear enlarged while others diminished. Pushkin's works do not mirror Russia but artificially enhance some aspects of it while reducing other, perhaps less flattering ones, to invisibility. Pushkin's image of Russian life is controlled and manipulative.

The metaphor of distorting purification in fact reappears in Gogol's comments on Pushkin in his 1847 *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends*, which I will discuss in the next section. The 1835 image of purification [*chistota, ochishchennaia krasota*]<sup>33</sup> reappears in the 1847 text as the "purified and improved image" with which Pushkin endows Russian reality in his prose [*ochishchennyi i luchshii vid*].<sup>34</sup> This time, Gogol' more explicitly treats it as "untrue," saying that "it is somehow better than the truth."<sup>35</sup> This later text supports my reading of the convex lens metaphor in the 1835 article as indeed quite negative. Moreover, in view of Gogol's own warts-and-all brand of realism, the charge of a sanitized image would be a liability. Surely, for readers then and now, Gogol's own fictional universe is playfully or grotesquely transformed, not at all a hyperrealist mirror-like reflection of "life." But Gogol' himself viewed it in terms of absolute mimetic fidelity. When reviewers accused Gogol's comedy *The Government Inspector* (1836) of lack of verisimilitude with regard to any recognizable Russian reality, Gogol' bluntly rebuffed them by appending a pithy epigraph to the play in his *Collected Works* of 1842: "No use blaming the *mirror* if your mug is crooked" [emphasis mine—E.B.]. In Gogol's own conception, the "mirror" of his art made no use of any distorting or purifying "special effects."

In the continuation of the 1835 article, Gogol' claims that Pushkin's very life was "completely Russian," filled with "revelry and freedom [*razgul i razdol'e*], toward which a Russian sometimes, having forgotten himself,

<sup>32</sup> Gogol' 8: 50.

<sup>33</sup> Gogol' 8: 50.

<sup>34</sup> Gogol' 8: 385.

<sup>35</sup> Gogol' 8: 384.

strives."<sup>36</sup> Interestingly enough, revelry and freedom are the distinguishing characteristics of Gogol's Ukrainians, not Russians. In "Vzgliad na sostavlenie Malorossii" [A Glance at the Making of Little Russia], which directly preceded "A Few Words About Pushkin" in the first volume of *Arabesques*, Gogol' unequivocally links these qualities with the national specificities of Ukrainian Cossacks (*razgul'naia zhizn', razgul'nye kholostiaki*,<sup>37</sup> *shirokaia volia kozatskoi zhizni*<sup>38</sup>). Could this be a contradiction? Or could Gogol' be straining to construct Russian national specificity out of his Ukrainian material? After all, he later pursued this strategy decisively in his 1842 revision of *Taras Bulba*.

Though both implications would be credible, Gogol's language in the Pushkin article—upon closer inspection—is too vague in its designation of revelry and freedom as actual Russian national traits. Gogol' tantalizes readers with this idea without quite affirming it—what's more, he ends up denigrating the peculiarities of Russian life. Stripped of its artful equivocations, the passage claims that only "sometimes" a Russian "strives" toward them, as if having "forgotten" his natural inclinations. Furthermore, Gogol's account of Pushkin's "completely Russian" life focuses on the poet's sojourn in the Caucasus, where "fate, as if purposefully, took him." This "fate," as contemporaries well knew, was the tsar's order that sent the poet into exile, during which he traveled to the Caucasus and the Crimea. In light of this hidden reference, the "completely Russian" life that brought the poet to the Caucasus emerges as subjection to political persecution, hence the exact opposite of the "revelry and freedom" with which Gogol' began the paragraph.

Gogol' argues that Pushkin became the greatest Russian poet as a result of his experience of the Empire's southern provinces, where his genius flourished and his verse reached the pinnacle of its power. Pushkin, in Gogol's view, became Russia's national poet by virtue of describing its non-Russian periphery. This argument represents a transparent effort on Gogol's part to align himself—at the time the author of works on mostly Ukrainian themes—with Pushkin and to encourage Russians to accept him as their national writer as well. If Pushkin became a national poet by writing about the Caucasus, Gogol' could become a national prose writer by writing about Ukraine. Monotonous Russia, he claims, cannot nourish great art, which requires the dramatism and variety so abundantly supplied by southern locales. "Fate," Gogol' writes, brought Pushkin

where the borderlands of Russia distinguish themselves by a sharp, majestic character, where Russia's flat immensity is punctuated by the mountains that reach the sky and where the South wafts about. The snow-covered giant, the Caucasus, amid sultry valleys, struck him; it summoned forth the strength of his soul and tore

<sup>36</sup> Gogol' 8: 50.

<sup>37</sup> Gogol' 8: 48, 49.

<sup>38</sup> Gogol' 8: 91. See also Gogol' 5: 199 and 9: 83–84.

away the last chains that still encumbered his free thoughts. He was captivated by the free poetic life of the daring mountaineers, their skirmishes, their quick unstoppable raids. And from this time his brush took on the broad sweep, the quickness and audacity that so amazed and struck a Russia that was just beginning to read.<sup>39</sup>

The warm Southern climes, the majesty of the landscape, the freedom-loving inhabitants and their brave, unstoppable raids are all features of Gogol's Ukraine and its Cossacks. These would have been fresh in *Arabesques*' readers' minds, since just in the preceding article ("A Glance at the Making of Little Russia"), they appeared as explicit topoi of Gogol's vision of Cossack Ukraine.<sup>40</sup> The Caucasus that "nationalized" Pushkin thus has a distinctly Ukrainian flavour. The experience of the non-Russian South—to which Ukraine, in Gogol's view, also belonged—is what transforms Pushkin into a truly Russian poet. Gogol establishes an indelible link between Russia's national and imperial identity; an invention of the national self becomes possible only through gazing at distant mirrors in imperial peripheries. Pushkin is for him the most "Russian" when he writes about the Caucasus.

Gogol attempts to make this argument persuasive by downplaying the importance of subject matter in literary representation—at least theoretically. Invoking a formula widely used at the time by Kireevskii, Nadezhdin, Belinskii, and others,<sup>41</sup> Gogol defines nationality in literature as the inner life of a nation that reveals itself irrespective of the work's subject matter:

[Pushkin] already at his roots was national because true nationality (*natsional'nost'*) consists not in the description of the *sarafan* [a traditional peasant dress—E.B.] but in the very spirit of the nation (*narod*). A poet can be national even when he describes a completely foreign world, but looks upon it with the eyes of his own national element, with the eyes of the whole nation, when he feels and speaks in such a way that to his compatriots it appears as if they themselves are feeling and saying this.<sup>42</sup>

In Pushkin's case this special national outlook consists in his ability to capture concisely the essence of the object while endowing it with great expressive power. Pushkin's one apt epithet, Gogol claims, stands for another writer's long descriptive passage.

Yet Gogol is far from considering subject matter irrelevant. He contradicts his own definition by alleging that once Pushkin turned to Russian themes, his art suffered. After all, Gogol does posit a link between the cultural-geographic space and the kind of literature it can nourish:

<sup>39</sup> Gogol 8: 50–51.

<sup>40</sup> Gogol 8: 42, 45–49.

<sup>41</sup> Kireevskii 53–55; Nikolai I. Nadezhdin, *Literaturnaia kritika. Estetika* (Moscow: Khudozh. literatura, 1972) 378; Belinskii 117.

<sup>42</sup> Gogol 8: 51.

But the recent poems of [Pushkin] (*poslednie ego poemy*), written at the time when the Caucasus with its severe grandeur hid itself from him... and when he submerged himself in the heart of Russia, in its ordinary plains, when he devoted himself to a deeper investigation of the life and customs of his compatriots and fancied becoming a fully national poet (*vpolne natsional'nyi poet*)—his poems no longer amazed everyone with the kind of vividness and dazzling audacity that pervades everything in which the Elbrus [a Caucasian peak—E.B.], the mountaineers, the Crimea, and Georgia make their appearance.<sup>43</sup>

Here Gogol makes an implicit distinction between a "fully national poet," whose subjects concern Russia proper, and, presumably, a "partially" national poet, whose Muse ventures to non-Russian peripheries. In retrospect, the Pushkin of the Caucasian poems may have been the greater artist, but incompletely national. The contrast between the more colourful mountainous South and the boring and flat Russia does, Gogol now claims, impinge on the kind of literature that these localities are able to inspire. He thus contradicts his own thesis of the subject matter's irrelevance for an expression of nationality. He suggests that Pushkin's internalized "national" worldview, with all its sharpness and expressivity, does after all become dulled by the external subject matter as the poet moves away from the south and confronts Russia proper.

Since Gogol himself was by then beginning to make inroads into Russian themes and was considering expanding them further, this likely resonated with Gogol's own anxieties about producing gripping fictions about what he calls in "A Few Words About Pushkin" "Russia's flat immensity" (*gladkaia neizmerimost' Rossii*).<sup>44</sup> The terror of the "flat place" (*sovershenno gladkoe mesto*)<sup>45</sup> that grips Major Kovalev in "The Nose" may well have had a personal dimension for Gogol himself.<sup>46</sup> The task of becoming the bard of the Russian plains proved too daunting in *Dead Souls*, where Gogol seems to have resigned himself to portraying the Russian landscape as a monotonous and unpicturesque procession of tree stumps and stunted pines. Gogol's method of enlivening a symbolic Russian space in the drafts to the second volume of *Dead Souls* was to transform it into a meeting place of the mountainous South—much like the Caucasus that he claims inspired Pushkin—and the visibly less dramatic and captivating Russian plain.<sup>47</sup>

In Gogol's diagnosis, Pushkin's effort to become a "fully national poet" backfired. The proof, in Gogol's view, are Pushkin's "most recent poems"

<sup>43</sup> Gogol 8: 52.

<sup>44</sup> Gogol 8: 50.

<sup>45</sup> Gogol 3: 53.

<sup>46</sup> I thank Monika Greenleaf for this insightful connection.

<sup>47</sup> Gogol 7: 7–8.



(poemy).<sup>48</sup> Which poems could these be? While the first records of Gogol's work on the article date to 1834, the date affixed to the article in *Arabesques* is 1832. Gogol often predated his works—including most of the *Arabesques* articles—probably to present them as bits of juvenilia. However, his choice of 1832 for “A Few Words About Pushkin” would naturally link the notion of Pushkin's “most recent poems” (“poema” is a longer poem) to Pushkin's patriotic works of the early 1830s, and in particular his anti-Polish poems of 1831 “To the Slanderers of Russia” and “The Anniversary of Borodino.” These were widely known texts, the fruits of Pushkin's civic activism, published in a separate brochure along with Zhukovskii's “Staraja pesnia na novyi lad” [An Old Song to a New Tune]. In what contacts Gogol did have with Pushkin and Zhukovskii in the summer of 1831, he would have likely heard Pushkin speak his mind on the subject of the Polish Uprising—a subject of his passionate epistolary exchanges, discuss the brochure with Zhukovskii, or possibly even read the drafts of his anti-Polish poems. Gogol may have chosen 1832 for his article to prompt the connection with these poems. At the very least, he would have been aware that his readers would make it. To mention Pushkin's “most recent poems” in an article dated 1832 most likely would invoke these 1831 poems, possibly also “Poltava” (1829) and the Prologue to the “The Bronze Horseman” (1834, the year Gogol actually worked on the article), all of which share a similar imperial agenda.<sup>49</sup> To disinvest these works of Pushkin from the distinction of nationalism—in an article that proclaims Pushkin as Russia's national poet—is to discount both these works' ideological agenda and their jingoistic brand of *narodnost'*.

Gogol claims that these works failed to strike a cord with Pushkin's audience. This is not entirely accurate. The court, Uvarov, the official press, and most nationalistically-inclined Russians were all enthusiastic. Some liberals, such as Petr Viazemskii or Herzen, opposed Pushkin's sentiments, but such opinion never reached the public forum. The 16-page brochure, printed in a military press with the warm support of the authorities, was available for the moderate price of 2 rubles at Smirdin's bookstore only 9 days—an astonishing speed—after Pushkin submitted the manuscript to the censorship.<sup>50</sup> The

<sup>48</sup> Gogol' 8: 52.

<sup>49</sup> Until Pushkin's death, only the patriotic Prologue to “The Bronze Horseman” was known to the Russian public (published, with some cuts, in *The Library for Reading* on 1 December 1834, that is, before the appearance of *Arabesques* in January 1835). The full poem, including the sad story of Evgenii that problematizes the odic introduction, appeared in bowdlerized form only in 1841. See Aleksandr S. Pushkin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 5 (Leningrad: Izd. Ak. Nauk SSSR, 1937–1959) 516–518 and Andrew Kahn, *Pushkin's “The Bronze Horseman”* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1998) 7.

<sup>50</sup> My account of the poems' reception is based on Olga Murav'eva, “Vrazhdy bessmyslennoi pozor”: Oda ‘Klevetnikam Rossii’ v otsenkakh sovremennikov,” *Novyi mir* 6 (1994): 198–204. For longer excerpts see Wiktor Woroszyński, *Kto zabil Pushkina*

mainstream Russian reader whose interests Gogol champions in his article on Pushkin (more on this below) welcomed Pushkin's new poems. Why then would Gogol misrepresent public opinion? Gogol often fabricated or manipulated his accounts of readers' responses to his own works, such as *The Government Inspector* or *Selected Passages*.<sup>51</sup> These distortions typically aim to steer the reception rather than to reflect it. In “A Few Words About Pushkin,” Gogol seems to be steering the audience away from accepting Pushkin's “most recent poems,” presenting this rejection—falsely—as an accomplished fact of Russian literary life. Gogol's cautious between-the-lines ideological polemic with Pushkin's patriotic works is a very likely cause.

The reason for the supposed unpopularity of Pushkin's recent works that Gogol states explicitly lies in Pushkin's turn to Russian subject matter. If Russian thematics bestow the honour of “full” Russianness, Gogol concludes, they do so at the expense of the work's attractiveness to the reader. But whom does Gogol view as Pushkin's “reader”?<sup>52</sup> Would *Russian* readers object to Russian themes? Rather than the Russian reader, Gogol seems to mean a wider imperial audience (“his poems no longer amazed *everyone*,” emphasis mine). Gogol chastises Pushkin for retreating into narrow Great Russian themes and perhaps also sentiments, which narrows his appeal to a wider national-imperial readership.

Indeed, Gogol emphasizes that Russia is incapable of nourishing the kind of art that would grip and dazzle the “mass public.” This is an emphatically broad designation most likely inclusive of provincial readers; in the next paragraph Gogol equates this mass public with the nation.<sup>53</sup> Having once experienced the powerful and seductive images of the Caucasus, this national-imperial public then demanded the same from Pushkin's portrayals of Russia, forgetting that “it is impossible to use the colours with which one paints the Caucasian Mountains and their free (*vol'nye*) inhabitants for the portrayal of the more peaceful and far less passionate Russian life.”<sup>54</sup> Gogol berates Pushkin's readers for demanding a truthful presentation of the nation and then complaining if they find the image insufficiently flattering. Until recently, the nation's character was “largely colourless, and the variety of passions was known but little. The poet is not to blame.”<sup>55</sup> Confronted with the audience's conflicting demands, the poet faces two choices, according to Gogol: to strain and distort

(Warsaw: Iskry, 1991) 286–311. See also T. J. Binyon, *Pushkin: A Biography* (London: Harper Collins, 2002) 377.

<sup>51</sup> Bojanowska 205–207, 361.

<sup>52</sup> I thank Oleh S. Ilyntzkyj for drawing my attention to this question.

<sup>53</sup> “Massa publiki, predstavliaiushchaya v litse svoiem natsiiu,” Gogol' 8: 52.

<sup>54</sup> Gogol' 8: 52.

<sup>55</sup> Gogol' 8: 52–53.

his descriptions or to remain truthful to his subject at the risk of losing his appeal. Despite his initial insinuation that Pushkin's "purified" descriptions embellished the subject, Gogol' now argues that Pushkin took the former route: truthfulness and the concomitant diminished popularity. Contradicting his previous definition, Gogol' now links national expression to the representational parameters of the depicted nation rather than the refracting prism of the artist's self. Thus he implies that in order to remain "national" in describing the colourless and passionless Russia, Pushkin had no choice but to churn out colourless and passionless verse.

Always interested in readers' reactions, Gogol' cites the story of a painting he once made of a stunted tree (*sukhoe derevo*). His neighbour criticized it by saying that a good artist chooses for his subject a healthy tree covered with leaves. Gogol' appears to deprecate such vulgar taste, but at the same time relishes his uncouth neighbour's aesthetic. To Gogol', writing about Russia resembles painting a stunted tree:

Those works of Pushkin that exude Russian nature are just as quiet and dispassionate as Russian nature. They can only be understood by one whose soul contains purely Russian elements, to whom Russia is a native land, whose soul is so subtly organized and developed in its feelings that it is capable of understanding Russian songs, unimpressive at first glance (*neblestiaschie s vidu*), and the Russian spirit.<sup>56</sup>

The passage suggests that Pushkin's works centered on Russian themes appeal to few readers. This again raises the question of which readers Gogol' had in mind. The (Great) Russian readers? If so, the passage would make little sense—unless Gogol' meant to be unflattering to the Russians. If an appreciation of Pushkin requires regarding Russia as one's fatherland, having a Russian soul, and an appreciation for Russian folk songs, in short, simply being a Russian, then what explains Pushkin's supposed unpopularity with the Russian audience? Does its preference lie with the wholesome southern tree rather than the stunted native one? Or are Russians not Russian enough: do they lack the kind of nationality that could attune them to Pushkin's art? After all, Pushkin's nationality is not shared by his generation, but *perhaps* will appear in two hundred years. Is Russia itself incapable of inspiring nationalist devotion in its inhabitants? Perhaps the kind of "subtlety" that is required to love Russian songs, which initially appear so unattractive, represents an insurmountable obstacle? If it takes such rarefied sophistication to appreciate Russian folk songs, does Pushkin stand a chance?

While these devious innuendos need not be put past Gogol', the passage becomes more coherent once we allow for the possibility that Gogol' works instead with a wider, imperial conception of the reader. Read this way, the passage calls into question the Russocentric conception of the "Russian" reader.

<sup>56</sup> Gogol' 8: 54.

If Pushkin's poems centered on Russia hold appeal only to Great Russians—those with a "purely" Russian soul who can respond viscerally to Russian folk songs—then this audience is too narrow. Gogol' implies that in order to be the bard of the *imperial* nation that is Russia, Pushkin would have to transcend the theme of "quiet and dispassionate" Russia proper. Like a stunted tree, this theme is unlikely to electrify the vast imperial readership. A match between the theme and the audience is the wisdom (*mudrost'*) that Gogol' draws from his neighbour's example. And the audience that Gogol' envisages in the article is a big one. This effort to broaden the notion of the "Russian" public to include non-Great Russians is consistent with the article's agenda of broadening the notion of "Russian" literature.

In the continuation of the article, Gogol' pushes inexorably towards the image of the great poet that he adumbrated in his opening paragraph: an isolated genius, entirely disconnected from the life of his country and abandoned by his readers. In effect, Gogol' turns Pushkin's own self-image (one of many) against him: a writer who exists in a tight and select circle of friends, his true audience and critics, and despises the vulgar tastes of the crowd. Gogol', who himself had a much less exclusive conception of the audience, construes Pushkin's authorial self-image as unsuitable for the needs of a national literature that imperial Russia circa 1830 was striving to create. Instead of addressing the diverse imperial nation, Pushkin speaks to his personal circle.

Enamored with pushing the limits of Romantic flamboyance, dramatism, and expressiveness, Gogol' found Pushkin's stylistic and emotional restraint and what he saw as the poet's elitist aesthetic irritatingly staid. He appears to ridicule exactly these qualities in his ostensible praise of the poet's unnamed short verse:

In order to comprehend [these poems], one needs to have a too refined sense of smell, a taste that is superior to the kind that allows one to understand only very sharp and large features. In a sense, one needs to be a kind of a sybarite who has long ago been overfed with coarse and heavy viands, who now eats a little birdie (*ptichka*) no larger than a thimble and can relish such a dish, the taste of which seems completely indefinite, strange, without any pleasure in it for someone who is used to swallowing the wares of a serf cook.<sup>57</sup>

Gogol' paints here an image of Pushkin's reader as a comical voluptuary and likens Pushkin's literature to a dainty dish of a tiny fowl, whose taste is "indefinite" and pleasureless for anyone other than these Epicurean gourmands, that is, for most people. He hammers at the idea of Pushkin's alienation from the mainstream of Russian life, from the middle-of-the-road provincial reader, fed in a down-home style by his serf cook. In his own contest for the Russian reader, this is exactly the audience that Gogol' strove to reach.

<sup>57</sup> Gogol' 8: 54.

The article's closing reinforces the image of Pushkin's solipsistic isolation. The notion of Pushkin as a poet's poet contrasts with the status of the *people's* author that Gogol' pursued. Pushkin's refined hermeticism, often upheld as an ideal among the literary circles of polite society, now becomes unpopularity plain and simple: "The more a poet becomes a poet, the more he depicts the feelings that are familiar to poets alone—the more visibly the crowd that surrounds him diminishes and in the end it becomes so small that [the poet] can count his true admirers on his own fingers."<sup>58</sup> The initial characterization of Pushkin as a "national poet" thus becomes associated, ironically, with jarring images of the poet's disjunction from current Russian reality and from the Russian reading public which, Gogol' claims, cares not a whit for his rarefied creations. Russia's "national poet," as Gogol' calls him in the article's opening fanfare, is in its closing image reduced to counting his true admirers on his own fingers.

Thus while Gogol' eagerly professes the national quality of Pushkin, he also demonstrably undermines it. This deeply equivocal praise creates the image of a national literature, authorial persona, and Russian audience that best fit Gogol's sphere of concerns and his brand of literature: focused on the empire's southern periphery, Romantic to the hilt, and aimed at broad popular appeal. Donald Fanger, commenting on Gogol's penchant for self-advertisement, is right to see in the article an instance of Gogol's game of "eminence by association."<sup>59</sup> Yet while inserting himself in Pushkin's company, as one of the few "sybarites" who can fathom Pushkin's true greatness, Gogol' at the same time plays a nasty trick on Pushkin. The mask of a fellow-aesthete notwithstanding, he treats Pushkin as a rival and strives to diminish Pushkin's image by showing his literary direction as unsuitable for nationally-oriented Russian culture. This larger cultural goal, Gogol' implies, will be better served by tapping the rich resources of Russia's imperial peripheries rather than dwelling on the dull environs of Russia "proper." The resultant nationality may seem only "partial," yet it will be far more attractive and will probably mobilize more imperial readers—who largely ignore the likes of Pushkin—into becoming a Russian nation. No doubt, he felt himself capable of delivering just what was needed.

#### PUSHKIN AND LITERARY NATIONALISM IN *SELECTED PASSAGES*

An article included in Gogol's 1847 *Vybrannye mesta iz perepiski z druz'iami* [Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends] corroborates my reading of his 1835 article on Pushkin. "V chem zhe nakonets sushchestvo russkoi poezii i v chem ee osobennost'" [What, Finally, Is the Essence of Russian Poetry and Wherein Lies Its Uniqueness]<sup>60</sup> continues the assessment of Pushkin's place

<sup>58</sup> Gogol' 8: 55.

<sup>59</sup> Fanger 70–71.

<sup>60</sup> Gogol' 8: 369–409.

in Russian literature initiated in "A Few Words About Pushkin" and throws into relief the earlier article's basic claims that I have identified above (the article's Pushkinian section appears on pp. 380–386). Gogol' now leaves out any proclamations of Pushkin's nationalness, and argues moreover that Russian literature as a whole has yet to become national. Indeed, the article portrays Russia as a nation under construction, whose true potential lies in the future. Gogol's 1847 description of Pushkin relies much less on equivocations and allusions, leaving the reader with a stark image of the poet—an image that supports my strategy of reading the 1835 article in a way that activates the semiotic potential generated by Gogol's skilfully deployed rhetorical excess. What Gogol' playfully insinuates in 1835, tempering his message for a number of personal, political, and professional reasons (prominent members of Pushkin's set, such as Zhukovskii and Pletnev, were among Gogol's key benefactors), receives a more straightforward wording in 1847. By then Pushkin had died and Gogol' had established his literary reputation, which gave him license to speak more freely. He had also switched to *glasnost'* in his relationships with friends and readers, to which *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends* well attests.

In 1847 Gogol' makes it rather plain that Pushkin was a great artistic genius, but not a national poet; he wrote for other poets, but not for the people. He existed in an ethereal land of the muses, but did not sully his creations with any touches of reality, existing outside of time, outside of life, even outside of himself ("Pushkin alone [among poets] has no individuality [*lichnosti*]"<sup>61</sup>). To his catalogue of Pushkin's inadequacies, Gogol' now adds the poet's unconcern with social utility. He claims that Pushkin offered no helpful ideas for contemporary society; his compatriots found no "use" in his works, by which Gogol' means civic and moral instruction. This is precisely the ideal that Gogol' preaches in *Selected Passages*, thereby performing the kind of service that he accuses Pushkin of shirking. Gogol' presents Pushkin's poetry as a powerful arsenal of weapons, yet an arsenal that the poet himself did not use for any battle.<sup>62</sup> His poetry remained a "temple": "unkempt reality, all naked, did not enter here."<sup>63</sup> As is characteristic of Gogol's purely instrumental construction of *his* Pushkin, Gogol' criticizes the poet for what he knows to be his own strong point. "Naked," "unkempt" reality certainly abounds in Gogol's own fiction.

Gogol' claims in "What, Finally, Is the Essence of Russian Poetry" that Pushkin's poetry revealed neither individuality nor nationality. Pushkin slipped in and out of various personas and nationalities (this is the charge that Dostoevskii later transforms into Pushkin's national virtue). Though Pushkin's

<sup>61</sup> Gogol' 8: 382.

<sup>62</sup> Gogol' 8: 382.

<sup>63</sup> Gogol' 8: 382.

turn to prose late in life represented a beginning of a more national expression, his premature death did not allow him to realize this potential. Still, Gogol' calls Pushkin's Scottish historical romance, *The Captain's Daughter*, the best Russian prose work. However, despite his gracious offer to grant Pushkin's prose primacy, Gogol', as usual, cannot resist hiding a barb in his compliment. He writes that everything in *The Captain's Daughter* "is not only the truth itself, but also somehow better than the truth."<sup>64</sup> Just as in the earlier article Gogol' criticized the sanitized beauty of Pushkin's poetry, its unfaithful distortion of real Russia in the "convex lens" of Pushkin's art, so now he dismisses the face-lift that Pushkin gives to the world in his prose. Summing up, Gogol' sees Pushkin's influence as great among poets, but calls his influence on society "insignificant."<sup>65</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

In light of my analysis, any effort to construe Gogol's vision of Pushkin as a national or ideal writer on the basis of "A Few Words about Pushkin" is bound to fail. The article's laudatory tone rings hollow when we unfold Gogol's rhetorical curlicues. The intricate rhetorical form allows Gogol' to write on Pushkin in a dual key, to produce at once a public ovation and a private jab, to say what he may have thought was expected of him and to insinuate what he may have really thought. The section on Pushkin in "What, Finally, Is the Essence of Russian Poetry" confirms the appropriateness of reading Gogol's earlier article against the grain of its surface claims. My rereading of Gogol's "A Few Words about Pushkin" thus exposes two interconnected myths surrounding Gogol': his supposed idealization of Russia's great poet and his emphatic endorsement of Pushkin as a national writer *par excellence*. Though Gogol' speaks highly of Pushkin's artistry, he at the same time undermines him and elevates his own art as more deserving of the label "national."

Many circumstantial factors bolster the plausibility of my conclusions. Gogol's predilection for romantic passion, baroque excess, and grotesquerie, and his desire to reach a more socially diverse audience, particularly in the provinces—all make Pushkin an unlikely idol for Gogol'. Pushkin's sense of Russian superiority may have also piqued Gogol's Ukrainian sensibilities. After all, Pushkin boasted in his poem "Moia rodoslovnaia" [My Genealogy] (1830) that his ancestors "did not jump over to the princes from the Ukrainians (*khokhly*)."<sup>66</sup> He sounded positively condescending in his published note on Gogol's stories *Evenings on a Farm near Dikan'ka* (1830–1831), when using

<sup>64</sup> Gogol' 8, 384.

<sup>65</sup> Gogol' 8, 385.

<sup>66</sup> Though first published in 1856, the poem circulated widely in manuscript in the literary circles, likely with Pushkin's encouragement. See Pushkin's letter to Benkendorf of 24 November 1831 (Pushkin, *Polnoe sobranie* 14: 241–242).

Catherine II's designation for the Ukrainians as a "singing and dancing tribe" (*plemia poiushchee i pliashushchee*).<sup>67</sup> The artistic and national differences coincided with social ones. Gogol' was acutely aware of his status as an impoverished parvenu in the circles of "literary aristocrats" and resented his reliance on their patronage in equal measure as he craved it. All these factors undergird Gogol's self-serving, competitive approach to Pushkin and the unmistakable overtones of ridicule and dismissiveness in his descriptions.

This article argues for taking Gogol's writings on national issues out of the interpretive rut in which they have been mired by centuries-old dogma. Both tsarist and Soviet critical traditions upheld the axioms that Gogol' fervently loved Russia, idolized Pushkin, and his Ukrainian sympathies never rivaled his devotion to Russia. With few exceptions, all interpretive work led to these predetermined conclusions. Yet there are in fact reasons to doubt all three of these claims.<sup>68</sup> As "A Few Words about Pushkin" shows, there is more complexity to Gogol's treatment of nationalist issues than meets the eye. Though Gogol' proclaims Pushkin the most national of Russian writers at the article's beginning, he later in effect strips him of this honour. Gogol's major fiction, such as *Dead Souls* or the *Taras Bul'ba* of 1842, features overt bows in the direction of Russian nationalism, yet many subtexts in these works seem to oppose this ethos. The ideological nuance of Gogolian texts is rewarding to explore in equal measure as the narratological and stylistic ones. Censorship, the imperatives of the government's doctrine of Official Nationality, and Gogol's reliance on the social set that venerated Pushkin, all discouraged unequivocal expression. Gogol' resorted to artistic devices to make his rebellious points.

Narratorial misdirection and subversive ironies abound in Gogol's non-fiction, just as they do in his fiction. Far from a mere sign of incompetence or inscrutable "weirdness," rhetorical flamboyance in Gogol's non-fiction serves an integral semantic role. In "A Few Words about Pushkin," bombastic claims of Pushkin's greatness and nationalness are deconstructed by a flow of ideas and images that end up contradicting these claims, offering instead a critical view of the poet's legacy. Gogol' frequently uses the same rhetorical strategy in his fiction. While the narrator of "Old-World Landowners" proclaims his hosts' hospitality absolutely perfect, he later intimates that the compulsory overeating during his visits was making him positively sick. Following Robert Maguire, who treats Gogol's "An Author's Confession" as a fictional structure, I thus wish to argue for the relevance of a "literary" reading of all of Gogol's non-

<sup>67</sup> Aleksandr S. Pushkin, rev. of *Vechera na khutore bliz Dikanki*, *Sovremennik* 1 (1836): 312.

<sup>68</sup> I explore these reasons at length in my *Nikolai Gogol: Between Ukrainian and Russian Nationalism*.

fiction, a reading that is sensitive to Gogol's manipulation of meaning through his rich arsenal of stylistic tropes.<sup>69</sup>

The center stage of Gogol's texts is a notorious quagmire of semantic instability. In his fiction, a nose can be a nose, but also a high-ranking bureaucrat, complete with a carriage and a uniform. Kaleidoscopic transformations affect most of Gogol's topoi, props, and themes, such as Nevskii Prospect, Akakii Akakievich's overcoat, Poprishchin's identity in "The Diary of a Madman," or Russian identity in *Dead Souls*. Similar instability bedevils Gogol's non-fictional texts, including Gogol's image of Pushkin as a national poet. My reading of Gogol's article suggests that there is another meaning beyond the compromised overt one. This meaning becomes manifest through attending to the ruptures and incongruities that Gogol's texts abundantly feature, through dwelling on them rather than dismissing them. To give Gogol's complexity its due, we must indeed allow for a possibility that his text can say one thing and unsay it at the same time, that a public fanfare may hide a private nuance, that Gogol's texts—including his non-fiction—often function like a Trojan horse, smuggling in meaning rather than stating it clearly.

Gogol may well be using the Trojan horse of "A Few Words About Pushkin" to convey his ideas about Russia's national-imperial dynamic rather than to personally discredit Pushkin. The true polemic that drives the article seems to concern the nature of the Russian Empire rather than that of Pushkin's art. This is characteristic of the period's debates about literary *narodnost'*, which tended to treat literature as merely an excuse for discussions about national identity. Gogol is silent about Pushkin's 1830s patriotic celebrations of a Russocentric empire, and instead locates the pinnacle of the poet's nationalness in unnamed early poems about the Caucasus and Georgia. The theme of the colorful and dramatic periphery is what, for Gogol, makes Russian literature interesting and where he locates its promise. In the context of the passionate debates of the 1820s–1840s about the essence of the Russian nation and its literature, Gogol's emphasis in the article on the ethnically non-Russian South represents a bold move and a challenge to Pushkin's model of imperial culture. In Gogol's schema, only the experience of the imperial periphery gave Pushkin's brush the deftness, the power, and the broad sweep that defined him as a national poet—until he turned his back on this periphery's invigorating potential. Gogol champions in the article an ex-centrally imperial, rather than Russocentric, kind of nationalism, one that places Russia's imperial periphery—a site where the Russian self is able to coalesce and become self-conscious—at the center of the "Russian" experience. In place of Pushkin's *imperialistic* model of Russian culture and Russian reader, Gogol puts forth an *imperial* one. Instead of the center imparting Russianness to the empire, the imperial periphery is to inform the content of Russianness. Though this may be seen as Gogol's

<sup>69</sup> Maguire 312–317.

participation in the imperial project, it also signifies an assertion of peripheral agency in defining Russian identity, an effort to open it up to voices from beyond the ethnically Russian core. One of those voices was to become Gogol's.